How Comrade Bloom Renders Leninism Compatable with Liquidation

by Roy Rollin, New York City Fourth Internationalist Caucus (ITO)

Steve Bloom's "Theses on Trotskyism and Solidarity" contain much that ITO supporters can find agreement with. To begin with, Steve is right when he insists on the need for serious revolutionaries "to study, educate around, and draw lessons from...historical experience..." Along those lines, he is also right when he "encourage(s) the study of the entire history of revolutionary Marxism" and points out that "Solidarity as an organization," cannot "be agnostic on, or indifferent to...fundamental questions of program and theory." Steve is again right when he points out that "the primary continuity of revolutionary Marxism...ran through the Trotskyist movement," and that "only the...Trotskyist current as a whole understood its totality...as an overall method of struggle." He is right when he takes aim at the "cheap shots" that "the question of Leninist organizational conceptions" gets and asks "what...alternative can (there) be except a more profound appreciation of the proper relationship between democracy and centralism...as actually developed by Lenin and the Bolshevik Party..." Steve is right when he urges that we should "educate around what the Leninist theory of organization really is, and win people to that conception" and points out that "the participation of a disciplined group of revolutionists" in the class struggle can mean the difference between success and failure. Finally, Steve is right to ask whether "a certain conscious ideological rejection of centralization" may "keep us from even trying to become the kind of organization that might be able to play (a) leadership role." While we might formulate these ideas differently than comrade Bloom has, the ITO, nevertheless, is in basic agreement with him as far these points are concerned.

Unfortunately, when all is said and done Steve has left so many avenues of escape available that we are forced to find ourselves more in disagreement. The ambiguous evenhandedness of his "Open Letter" will allow anyone and everyone to interpret it as they please. There are enough ifs, ands or buts attached to almost all of Steve's arguments to do a lawyer proud. That should make it more than "possible that" Steve and Alan Wald, to whom the "Open Letter" is aimed, " will find substantial...if not complete, agreement." If "defenders" of Leninism and Trotskyism can come to "complete agreement" with their opponents, than who benefits from such an agreement? Seeing how recent events have transpired in the FI in general and Solidarity in particular; to ask the question is to answer it.

The source of this ambiguity can be found in Steve's "support (for) the majority perspectives on 'Building the Fourth International'," the USFI leadership's license to liquidate Trotskyism into the murky waters of the "world revolutionary movement." In so far as ambiguity goes, both documents have much in common, since they serve similar aims. Steve, however, is forced to engage in more of what Paul LeBlanc has aptly described as "polemical acrobatics," since his tightrope act is aimed at a more specialized audience than that of his pals in Paris. On the one hand, he must talk enough Trot to keep fidgety former FITers firmly in their seats. On the other, he must pay his respects to all the rethinkers, redefiners and rejecters of revolutionary Marxism so that the scotch-tape unity he has helped broker holds together.

Heterogeneous and Inexplicit "Trotskyism" or Desperately Seeking Somone to Regroup With

For the past year, Steve has made increasingly rapid progress in the art of being a "Leninist" and a "Trotskyist" in words and an accomplice of the liquidators in deeds, until he attained virtuosity in it. So out of one side of his mouth he claims that "the primary continuity of revolutionary Marxism...ran through the Trotskyist movement..." But out of the other he insists that "we cannot, and should not try to build Solidarity as a homogeneous...explicitly 'Trotskyist' organization." Why not, if, as he adds, "Trotskyism was the only organized international current...which could provide a coherent understanding of world realty from a proletarian point of view?" "Was," it seems, is the key word here as Steve goes on to "point out (that) it is no longer true that only "Trotskyists"...are able to draw the essential conclusion about revolutionary politics..." Of course, for Steve, and his majority mentors as well, mum's the word insofar as who else "draw(s)" those "essential conclusions" nowadays. No other "organized international current" is, or ever has been, cited so as to lend credence to this claim. Unless the sordid lot of New Left leftovers that an ample amount of FI sections have already liquidated into qualifies as an "organized international current." Only the "essential conclusions" they "dr(e)w...about revolutionary politics" was their uselessness in the face of the New World Order. Or maybe the rightward drifting flotsam and jetsam from the sinking ship of Stalinism, like the COC, fit the bill. Afterall, their last words before they go under the sea of social democracy will be a cry for abstract (i.e. bourgeois) "democracy." The latter is, of course, the real "defining" word as far as the designer left goes. And that is whose favor the fusion fanatics so long for.

Steve goes on to say that he "expects(s)...many people, from...different...traditions can come to understand...the most important programmatic elements that continue to define revolutionary Marxism for us." True, he is quick to correctly point out that for them to do so would require "a fundamental break with their past." He even hints "that the limited experiences we have had so far" in the realm of regroupments are no great shakes. But because he is an advocate, as well as an able practitioner, of the majority's moribund methodology he is no position to enlighten us as to how future fusion fiascoes can be avoided since the resolution he supports calls for even more of the same. Least of all is he in a position to tell us how anyone "from...different historical traditions" will "break with their past" and "come to a common understanding with us about basic revolutionary Marxist strategy" when we have, in fact, been the ones breaking from our past, abandoning important aspects of our politics, in order to entice them. The first thing that had to go was the very existence of "a disciplined group of conscious revolutionaries," who, basing themselves upon those "programmatic elements" could have served as a pole of attraction for those genuinely desiring to make the break Steve speaks of. Instead we made the break, got broken by it and will be doing even more of it should Steve and his international co-thinkers get their way.

Taking Lenin Off the Shelf...In the Hereafter

While Steve may "continue to affirm...basic programmatic conceptions maintained by the FI..." he is not about to let such sectarian concerns get in the way of enticing, or maintaining, fusion partners who don't, even if the latter "think that all they need to do is...denounce...caricatures of Leninism." Thus he is to quick to add a disclaimer to his defense of the works of Lenin and Trotsky, let alone Cannon. So as to reassure those, like Wald, who want to "put them on the shelf" Steve makes clear that while he may, on occasion, take them off, he certainly is not about to take them out of the library! He engages in a lot of kick-

ing and screaming; no doubt, to reassure a few of his former FIT friends who are chafing under the collars after a year of "trying to create a common revolutionary Marxist organization." But in the end, Steve winds up "agree(ing) with those who assert that Solidarity cannot be, or even strive to become, a 'Leninist vanguard party' at the present time..." And why not? Afterall, isn't "the need to build revolutionary parties" in the here and now one of the "aspects of (the) broad revolutionary Marxist program" Steve claims to still stand on? Not so long ago, Steve was anything but agnostic towards those who "question(ed)...whether building a vanguard formation is a present-day task or something that can be postponed for the indefinite future." He then recognized that "if they (Solidarity) and we (the FIT) have completely different conceptions of what Leninism means in practice today...there may well be some problems if we join forces based on common verbal declarations that cover up such differences." (FIT IDB No. 130, February 1992)

Well, there certainly are "some problems," but whose conceptions have changed in the meantime? Certainly not those who continue to beat their breasts in a "global denunciation of 'democratic centralism' or 'Leninism'" Who is it that is now "cover(ing) up such differences" since those differences have certainly not disappeared, at least as far as the anti-Leninists go. Or is it that Steve has gotten cold feet at the prospects of translating theory into practice. Afterall, the latter will certainly require a struggle with those who assert that Leninism is irrelevant at best and an obstacle to further fusion fiascoes at worst, a fight to the finish with those whom it would *appear* that Steve has fundamental political and methodological differences with. Yet it is precisely those elements that Steve has thrown in his lot with, both in Solidarity and the FI. Since a main priority that ensues from this is to provide an air of "Leninist" legitimacy for the domestic debacles the FI's fusion fever has helped bring about, that fight is unlikely to even start.

The Majority's "New Party" for the "New Epoch"..."Pre-1917 Social Democracy"

Lenin once said that, "political questions cannot be mechanically separated from organizational questions...and anybody who accepts or rejects the Bolshevik party organization independently of whether or not we live at a time of proletarian revolution has completely misunderstood it." Perhaps it is the objective conditions we face today, "the present time" as Steve puts it, that forces a stalwart Leninist like himself to "suggest Solidarity should not try to become a Leninist Vanguard Party." Afterall, for Marxists, being determines consciousness, not vice versa, and only volunteerists of the Pol Pot school would want to force the hand of history. Maybe Steve is not on such shaky ground, then, when he concludes that, "at least for the present, we can conceive of ourselves more like pre-1917 Social Democracy than like post-1917 Bolshevism or post-1920s "Trotskyism." Or maybe not. One wonders if Steve has taken the trouble to think through the implications of what he is saying. Whether he has or he hasn't, his allies in the French LCR have already done so for him and what's implicit in his "conceptions" is explicit in theirs. Claiming "that there has been a change of epoch" the LCR leadership concludes the need for "non strategically defined parties" that "draw together all those who sincerely want to fight for the transformation of society without...having to agree on reform or revolution." In other words, since revolution is no longer on the agenda, who needs a revolutionary party based on a revolutionary program standing in the way of getting at all those ready, willing and able reformists?

Leninism: What It Is...

Ever since the debate around Lenin's concept of party organization began, opponents of Leninism have managed to miss what Luckacs called, "the reality of the total process," instead concentrating on isolated points of contention. Those who oppose it today, or defend its value on paper rather than in practice, continue to do so. Not only is the Leninist theory of organization firmly rooted in and reflective of the realities of contemporary capitalism. It is just as firmly based upon the peculiarities of the proletariat as an oppressed and exploited class. The latter remains excluded from any share in the social wealth it creates, including the sources of knowledge necessary to carry out its historical task as capitalism's "gravediggers." As James P. Cannon has pointed out, Leninism is "deep-rooted in two of the weightiest realities of the twentieth century: the actuality of the workers' struggle for the conquest of power, and the necessity of creating a leadership capable of carrying it through to the end." Linked together with those realities are the heterogeneity of the working class; what Cannon called the "irregular self-determination of the class as a whole," and the exceptionally conscious character of the struggle for socialism.

Between a working class that exists as a class in itself and a working class organized as class for itself lies a world of difference. The difference lies in an unevenness in consciousness due its stratification and division. In addition there exists a discontinuity insofar as participation by the majority of the class in mass struggle is concerned. Social Democratic parties, be they pre- or post-1917, claiming to represent the class as a whole, only mirror that unevenness of consciousness as well as the passivity and inactivity that go with it. In addition, they wind up representing the reformist bureaucracies that come to dominant them in periods of stability. To expect that the unification and centralization of the knowledge and experience needed for the emergence and development of socialist class consciousness to take place through a vehicle other than a vanguard based on higher level of consciousness as well as continuous activity is an ahistorical pipedream.

No less utopian is the movementist mantra, so near and dear to "exemplary member(s) of Solidarity" other than Steve Bloom, whose PC holy of holies is the "self organization" of fill in the blank. This state-of-the-art school of sectoralist tailendism counterposes the "practical work of building the movements," at the lowest level of common-denominator consciousness, of course, to what is wrongly seen as abstract propagandizing for socialism. The same holds true for the spontaneist illusion that "consistent" trade unionism, feminism, nationalism or pacifism will lead of their own accord to socialism, without the political centralization the vanguard alone is capable of providing. Yes, a revolutionary who divorces him or herself from the mass movement will most likely become a sectarian. But divorced from the program of revolutionary Marxism, cadres buried in mass movements succumb to opportunism.

Building a party that functions as a "tribune of the oppressed," is, in fact, the only effective way of building the movements. That is, if one aspires to lead those movements in a socialist direction that avoids the sectoralization and fragmentation that single issuism inevitably leads to. Rosa Luxemburg pointed this out when she wrote that, "the practical daily struggle for reforms...offers...the only means of engaging in the proletarian class struggle and working in the direction of the final goal: the conquest of political power..." Lenin and Trotsky translated it into reality through the medium of a vanguard party, the united front tactic and an action program of transitional demands that link revolution to the actual activity and organizations of the working class. Leninism is thus more than an abstract organizational conception; it is a strategy for revolution in the imperialist epoch.

...and Why It's Relevant "For the Present"

In the words of Georg Lukacs, "Lenin's theory of party organization presupposes the fact, the actuality, of the revolution" and "is conceived as an instrument of class struggle in a revolutionary period." In other words, revolution is not only something that is desirable but something that flows directly from the structural crisis of world capitalism. Karl Kautsky, the "Pope" of "pre-1917 Social Democracy," of course, thought otherwise. His theory of "ultra-imperialism" predicted, in his own words, "the joint exploitation of the world by internationally united finance capital in place of the mutual rivalries of national finance capitals..." Having drawn the conclusions they have regarding "new epochs" and "non strategically defined parties," the USFI majority has, not surprisingly, wound up with those who by embracing Kautsky and rejecting Lenin, think they can reverse the "great schism" that took place during World War I and the Russian Revolution between communism and social democracy.

But has capitalism in fact surmounted the contradictions that have persistently plagued it throughout the imperialist epoch? Has the collapse of the Soviet bloc really ushered in a period of peace and prosperity in which a slew of social reforms are on the order of the day and revolution is but a pipedream? And will mass multi-tendencied labor organizations, dominated by reformist bureaucracies feasting at the trough of imperialist super-profits (what else was "pre-1917 Social Democracy?") be the end result of all this? A quick look at even the bourgeois press suggests otherwise. Be it in the east or the west, capitalism remains in trouble. Tensions are heating up, not cooling down, as workers around the world begin to fight back against the employers' attacks.

If revolutionaries are to "be in a position...to provide the leadership such movements...need to succeed," then the necessary education, schooling and testing of the vanguard needs to take place before the outbreak of mass struggle, not during, let alone after it has taken place. Or as Lukacs put it, "the proletariat (cannot) gradually evolve ideologically into the revolutionary vocation appropriate to its class." Antonio Gramsci was even more precise when he pointed out, "the decisive element in every situation is the force, permanently organized and preordered...which can be advanced when...the situation is favorable (and it is favorable only to the extent to which such a force exists and is full of fighting ardor); therefore, the essential task is...forming and developing this force, rendering it ever more homogenous, compact, conscious of itself." History has come to call this force the vanguard party and it remains as much a necessity today as it was when Gramsci and Lukacs were alive. The working class has already paid far too high a price this century for its failure to have created one. "Conceiv(ing) of ourselves more like pre-1917 Social Democracy" (and the degeneration began long before 1917 or even 1914), aside from having no material basis in reality, will only make the tab more expensive for the working class.

You Can't Fight With Cream Puffs; Extremism In Defense of Leninism is No Vice

Having come to praise Leninism, Steve Bloom winds up helping to bury it. His war of words with Alan Wald is, like that stage of the Second World War when Allied and Axis troops sat peacefully behind their respective lines of fortifications hoping for an early end to hostilities, a phoney war. But Steve's side has already surrendered; Leninism and Trotskyism are amongst the prisoners taken and the USFI majority resolution is the treaty sanctioning the process. Indeed the majority of this majority are, in the words of Paul LeBlanc, "comrades who believe that the concept of a revolutionary vanguard party and the method of democratic centralism are now in the garbage can of History, that the theory of permanent revolution is of questionable validity, the Leninist analysis of imperialism may have limited practical relevance, the transitional program is an historical curiosity, that the political independence of the working class can be advanced by supporting certain bourgeois candidates, and that a pragmatist approach to politics is more appropriate than the utilization of traditional Marxist perspective."

All this sounds a lot like Solidarity, doesn't it? It's no wonder than that this majority has always had a soft spot for Solidarity insofar as American "FI supporters" were concerned, since what they are out to do is "Solidaritize" the FI. And far from fighting against that development, Steve Bloom has become an active accomplice of it, even if he clutches at an orthodox sounding formula here or there to camouflage the process or soothe his conscience in doing so. Shadowboxing exercises like his "Open Letter" are but a facesaving gesture directed at those former FITers who have begun to wake up and smell the roses.

Here it might be instructive to "conceive of ouselves...like pre-1917 Social Democracy." Kautsky, even when he was reaffirming "the tried and trusted" orthodoxy of the self-styled "Marxist center," was far more concerned with warding of the radicalism of Rosa Luxemburg than the revisionism of Eduard Bernstein. The reformists received little more than a series of slaps on the wrist rather than the "organizational consequences" Rosa rightly clamoured for. Eventually Kautsky would "find substantial...if not complete agreement" with them. Such are the end results of trying to "stone revisionism to death with cream puffs," as one historian of the period described it. Similarly, the author of "Bloom's Law" excoriates ITO supporters for being "wrong...in (our) general methodology" for daring to suggest that those who advocate support for Democrats and imperialist intervention in the Balkans subscribe to a methodology slightly different than that of revolutionary Marxism. Those in Solidarity who desire "to become the kind of organization that might be able to play the necessary leadership role" will find no more leadership coming from Steve than the left in "pre-1917 Social Democracy" found coming from Kautsky. And while Rosa may have smelled the stench coming from the corpse of Social Democracy long before Lenin, her mistake was waiting too long to organize against it. We urge all those who want to fight with weapons more weighty than cream puffs to join us in the ITO, where we remain committed to doing just that. ■

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